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AN INTERVIEW WITH
THE DANISH HISTORIAN

**PETER
CHRISTENSEN**

EUROPE
ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY
AND MULTICULTURALISM

BY ANDERS MICHELSEN

Although we may be used to conceive of Europe in political, economical and cultural terms, not least in the debate on multiculturalism, it is impossible to dissociate the notion of Europe from nature. Not only is nature closely linked to European thought in philosophy, science and culture, not to mention art. To the modern Europeans nature seems a vast and almost inexhaustible resource. Something which may be mute, a thing in itself, but which is nevertheless always there, to utilize, learn from, or doubt. Nature can be apprehended and still keep its reserve. In modernity nature becomes something which can be designated, manipulated and transformed – without costs – in science and technology as well as in society and culture.

Nature thus plays a significant role in the evolvment of modernity and modern institutions as one can see in the thinking of Hobbes, Rousseau, Hegel and Marx. In these discourses nature becomes closely linked to economy, politics and ideology. In the industrial age nature is seen as a state of affairs transcended by the European and so is natural man, i.e. the rest of the world. The European discourse of nature thus becomes linked to the establishment of European hegemony over the world, not

least from the nineteenth century. Nature plays its part in the claim that all other races and cultures are inferior to Europe as one can read in Kipling's poem from 1899; "Take up the White Man's burden – ... On fluttered folk and wild –, Your new caught, sullen peoples, half-devil and half child."

However this discourse of nature has not kept its position. With the postmodern deconstruction of modern metanarratives throughout the last decades, a new idea of nature has been formed. Now the bond between man and nature is emphasized. Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes about nature in "Themes from the lectures" (Northwestern University Press 1970 (Paris 1963)); "In truth, as soon as one probes into it a little, one encounters an enigma in which the subject, spirit, history and the whole of philosophy are involved." (p.132):

"... nature is not simply the object, the accessory of consciousness in its *tête-à-tête* with knowledge. It is an object from which we have arisen, in which our beginnings have been posited little by little until the very moment of tying themselves to an existence which they continue to sustain and aliment. Whether in the case of the individual event of birth, or the birth of institutions and societies, the originary relation between man and being is not that of the for-itself to the in-itself, for this relation occurs in each man capable of perception. However surcharged with historical significations man's perception may be, it borrows from the primordial at least its manner of presenting the object and its ambiguous evidence. Nature, says Lucien Herr in a comment upon Hegel, "is there from the first day." (ibid., p.132-133).

The idea of nature as a thing in itself, something to be designated, manipulated and transformed is replaced by a new ambiguity. The crisis of Western world hegemony is accompanied by an environmental crisis in the industrial system, and this is reflected in new notions of nature. The idea of nature as inexhaustible is transformed into a discourse of man linked to nature. In the environmental concern are contained possibilities of a new thinking pushed forward by the need to take action *vis-a-vis* the

escalating environmental problems in all parts of the world. –But concern for the environment cannot stand alone. It must also be part of a multicultural, postcolonial discourse.

This is one of the interesting perspectives in the Danish historian Peter Christensen's germinal doctoral thesis – one of the most important books about history written in Denmark for several decades – about the relations between ecology and history in The Middle East between 500 B.C. and A.D 1500, "The Decline of Iranshahr. Irrigation and Environments in the History of The Middle East 500 B.C. to A.D. 1500" (Museum Tusulanum Press. University of Copenhagen 1993). Christensen describes how society and nature converge over two thousand years of history in The Middle East with both sustainability and catastrophe as consequence. In detailed analyses of the areas which today consist of contemporary Iraq and Iran he establishes a new structural historical understanding of relations between nature and man.

Peter Christensen can be seen as part of a new international environmental history emerging within professional history. But the importance of Christensen's contribution is the – direct and indirect – emphasis on the relation between critique of the Eurocentric notion of world history and detailed analysis of relations between historical development and environment. Thus Christensen's analysis also becomes an important contribution to the multicultural debate and the creation of a multicultural world. First, it proves that nature must be seen as something which is historically present as an interplay between nature and civilization, and therefore not necessarily connected with European ideologies of modernity, industrialism and colonialism. Second, it shows how this interplay is always specific and thus regional, creating many – multicultural, displaced – versions of environmental history. Third, it demonstrates how the Malthusian ideas which lie behind some present Western notions of environmental history, including a critique of demographical development in The Third World may be qualified,

and thus dissociated from being yet another version of “the white man’s burden”. – In short Peter Christensen’s environmental history takes us beyond the idea of Europe – The West – as the center of the world.

Anders Michelsen: In your book “The Decline of Iranshahr. Irrigation and Environments in the History of The Middle East 500 B.C. to A.D. 1500”, you argue that environmental factors lie behind the history of Iranshahr (i.e. contemporary Iraq and Iran) in The Middle East between 500 B.C. and A.D 1500.?

Peter Christensen: My argument is not that historical development is based on environmental factors only. My point is that we have to include ecological factors in the understanding of the main lines of world history. Changes in the environment, as well as demographical change, or class struggle, cannot be used as universal explanations. Historical development is the result of an interplay of many different elements and we cannot know in advance which factors we may have to emphasize in a given historical context.

The history of The Middle East is an example of this. Previously, it has not been unusual to blame Islam or invasions of nomads for the major decline which the area suffered in cultural and economical terms from the early Middle ages to modern times. Leaving the highly questionable notion of a general decline apart, it is evident that ecological conditions have played an important part in the historical changes of Iranshahr. Irrigation and especially irrigation on a grand scale such as was carried out in Mesopotamia (Iraq) strain the environment, it is evident. The importance of this however, depends on the natural conditions on the spot, i.e. the local physical context, how often irrigation was practiced, etc. In any case irrigation can only be considered one element in the interplay of different elements, which in the end make up the history of the area. The decision to construct gigantic irrigations systems in the area was political. When the first plague struck in the sixth century A.D., destroying a great part of the workforce, the ability to keep the irrigation system in order was seriously

reduced. Thus we can see that the historical development was a result of the interplay between political and epidemiological factors as well as conditions based on the natural environment.

The perspective of environmental history may help us towards a better understanding of the world today, but it also entails dangers if it is not applied properly. One important danger is ecological determinism as we see in environmental history in USA today, where historians, archeologists and anthropologists have been working with models and concepts from biological ecology. Here the tendency towards heavy reductionism is evident. According to their point of view, everything is decided by the fact that mankind multiplies incessantly. Sooner or later this spontaneous increase in population leads to a lack of resources which cause either catastrophe or technological innovation, which enhance resources. However all this is seen as a losing battle because of the increase in population, which is bound to continue, creating new problems with resources.

These arguments lead directly to Malthusianism. Demographical change may have a significant impact on historical development, but it is not more important than other elements of history. As a matter of fact, it is very difficult to prove that increase in population is independent of other elements in history. It is evident that the population of the world is far larger now than in the past, but this should not lead to conclusions concerning cause and effect. Perhaps demographical change is a serious problem today, but it does not prove that it always was and will always have to be.

Another problem with environmental history is the danger of specialization, along the lines of women’s history, children’s history, history of religion, military history, economical history etc. This may lead to an accumulation of detailed studies of environment and history. However, it doesn’t help the big picture, i.e. the understanding of long-term history, which is the foremost task of professional history.

In my book the environmental perspective serves as a point of

departure for a comprehensive picture of the history in The Middle East. Because of natural conditions the construction of grand irrigation systems in Iranshahr lead to a fragile environment in some places, but elsewhere it produced more sustainable results. The destiny of the irrigation systems not only depended on a fragile environment. Wars, changes in morbidity, increased tax pressures, inefficient administration also played their part.

A.M.: You apply a multidimensional concept of explanation based on comparative models. Along with that you maintain a resulting effect which turns out to be a sort of surprise. An event which may seem unpredictable in advance turns out to result in environmental consequences?

P.C.: My position is that history is unpredictable, but of course it can be explained afterwards. In western Iranshahr, in Mesopotamia, the place of the first big concentration of people in the world, the first cities and states, a significant physical – environmental – breakdown occurred during the Middle Ages. This obviously had something to do with irrigation having reached a scale which became a threat to environmental stability because of salinization of the soil and silting up of the irrigation canals. But the breakdown resulted from something which we have to consider a coincidence, the plague pandemic which struck from the sixth to the eighth century. It resulted in a drastic reduction of the population. Because of the inherent ecological instability which is a feature of Mesopotamian nature, the Mesopotamian irrigation system demanded an extensive and continuous effort to clean the canals and build levees. When the plague decimated the work force the maintenance went to a standstill. The interplay between inherent ecological instability and external recurring plague created the crisis and made the final impact on the Mesopotamian irrigation system, including the states and cultures of the region.

The eastern part of Iranshahr, the Iranian plateau, displays another historical pattern. Here agriculture was also based on irrigation and the rulers were the same as in Mesopotamia. Nevertheless settlement and agriculture

here proved stable, sustainable if you like. There was never a breakdown. Partly this was due to less destructive irrigation technologies, based on different natural conditions. Also the frequency of diseases was probably lower. The interplay between the different elements thus produced a completely different result, in this case.

Environmental history cannot insist that nature, the physical conditions – environment, ecology – is the ultimate and decisive factor in history. The crucial issue is to make environmental history a perspective. I.e. asking qualified questions, and acknowledging that the history of man is part of the history of nature and vice versa. In the light of contemporary history the interplay between man and nature must be an important variable especially when we want to explain the grand connections in world history. I would like to emphasize that ecology is a variable. Ecological factors always appear in a concrete historical context, and the task of the professional historian is to understand this context.

It also applies to the problems we face today. The concern for environmental history has appeared because we need to explain the environmental crisis of today. We can use historical explanations to direct our actions today. Let me give an example. In the Brundtland commissions report “Our Common Future” from 1987, it is taken for granted that the world had no serious environmental problems until the advent of the affluent consumer societies after WW 2, which were paralleled by a demographical explosion in The Third World. In a historical perspective this is nonsense. Throughout entire history man has changed, manipulated and destroyed nature, often with disastrous consequences. The modern societies contribute in particular to the increasing pollution and the consumption of non-renewable resources. Nevertheless forest clearing, erosion, creation of deserts, extermination of other forms of life can be traced back to the Middle Ages and ancient times. In the Middle East the construction of large scale irrigation was a drastic way to change nature and it is impossible to understand the physical appearance of the landscape in the area

today, if one doesn't take the historical process into consideration.

The whole world of today is a product of this entire history. We still have to live with epidemic diseases: smallpox (until recently), measles, whooping cough, influenza, because long ago we became farmers, who had to live with animals. And because we became urban settlers living in densely populated cities where man-to-man infections can survive. The appearance of acute infectious diseases five thousand years ago demonstrate that the most distant past can have a direct impact on the present. However I may add that the transformation also has led to stable, sustainable systems. For instance the Northwestern European cultural landscape which until the recent industrialization of agriculture was in no danger of environmental breakdown. Human activity does not necessarily lead to catastrophe.

A.M.: Your analysis is a critique of a progress oriented concept of development. Along with multidimensional explanations and the unpredictability of actual events you also present another concept of development, where the environmental aspect of history comes close to evolution. The short term and medium term tendencies are only relatively predictable but the long term tendency seems to be sufficiently clear. In evolutionary terms the earth is bound to get worn out?

P.C.: Time moves in one direction, and the changes which follow from historical development are irreversible. We cannot “return to nature”. I don't know what such an expression means, it is a romantic dream. We live in a world which has been “used” by civilization and thus it has become worn out. What is important is to find appropriate techniques and methods to do this, and this may have far reaching consequences for the kind of life we expect. The irrigation systems I have analyzed were a result of human decisions, which, theoretically speaking, could have been made differently. It is the same problem today. The global environment change because we take action and make decisions, which could be different. In this respect we can use our knowledge

about historical processes also concerning the environment. This is a common condition for all mankind, throughout the world.

A.M.: Your book resembles in certain ways Fernand Braudel's famous *The Mediterranean and The Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. As Braudel, you emphasize geographical and topographical structures in a regional space?

P.C.: We must try to understand the history of the whole world. However, it consists of many histories. As a minimum, we can identify clearly a history of Europe as a unit. This history is not identical with the history of other regions of the world, for instance The Middle East, Africa, China, India, not least The Americas. In order to write world history we must proceed with comparative concepts, and thus we need something to compare. I.e. we must define meaningful analytical and comparative units in time and space. When I write about Iranshahr (and not The Middle East) it is because this area is easy to delimit, in geographical and historical terms. In the same manner one can define The Indian Ocean as an analytical unit. Or the space of The Mediterranean. But the objective must always be a universal history, comprised of many regional and comparable histories, which in the end establish a world history.

A.M.: One of the interesting perspectives of your book is its implicit multiculturalism, which leads to a criticism of Eurocentrism. Not only because your subject – The Middle East – is outside Europe, but also because you criticize the European idea of a decline of the Islamic, Middle Eastern world.

P.C.: In Denmark the historical tradition has always and predominantly been occupied with Danish history. And this is – obviously – a problem, a result of a certain parochialism among professional historians in the country.

As soon as we apply comparative models we have to go beyond this national tradition. We cannot understand the history of the regions and countries of the world, without comparing them with other regions and countries, ultimately the whole world.

One of the important results of my book is to demonstrate that other regions of the world have a separate history. When we draw a distinction between Europe and the rest of the world, it does not mean that the rest of the world is one huge undifferentiated mass. In Iranshahr we can, beyond any doubt, see that the region has its own distinctive history, which is not arbitrary in any sense.

This is directly and indirectly a critique of Eurocentrism. I.e. the idea that history has an universal pattern which does not change significantly throughout world history. First history took off in Egypt and Mesopotamia, then in The Mediterranean, then in the early Moslem civilization, but after that, Europe took the lead, and the rest of the world was reduced to insignificance. We have to understand that every region has a history in its own terms. If we claim that Iranshahr suffered a decline, we are proposing a far too simple explanation. We have to ask, what kind of decline, regarding the population, culture etc. In the end we may find a very unique history, which cannot simply be summarized as "decline". All regions have their own histories with specific phases, ups and downs, and in each case we find specific, limiting environmental conditions. And if we add all the other elements of the particular history, it is impossible to maintain the undifferentiated notion of decline. The only way we as historians can gain scientific knowledge is by establishing comparative parameters.

A.M.: Does this lead to a multicultural position regarding history?

P.C.: We have to acknowledge that it was the Europeans who colonized the world, and, so far, it is also Europeans who have written a great part of world history. The world bears the mark of Europe, whether one likes it or not. In this respect we might even claim that Europe's history is the most important history in the world. This is not a Eurocentric position. Europe cannot be a model of world history in any sense of the word. On the contrary, all this means, is that we can only understand the history of Europe if we understand the history of the world, and thus we are led to a multicultural perspective on world history. We may also say that the

history of Europe is played out in the world, not in Europe, and this decenters Eurocentrism. It may sound as a kind of deconstruction but I see it as a strength of the historical science, i.e. of the inherent criticism, and self-criticism in professional history. I don't want to deconstruct the scientific consistency of the discipline, but I accept that the worldpicture of many European historians has become somewhat obsolete. But I also see a way out of this which is consistent with the present paradigm of comparative world history, as presented above, and as such I cannot adhere to the doctrine of deconstruction.

A.M.: In other words, out of the environmental perspective on the history of Iranshahr develops an openness in history. Environmental elements, which must be considered a somehow common physical factor for all societies and cultures – despite or exactly because of the differences mentioned above – can lead to a multicultural and diverse perspective on history?

P.C.: I think so, and I also believe that this may indicate a way of producing relevant historical knowledge. If environmental history can create a pluralistic approach to the histories and cultures of the world, and thus reverse Eurocentrism, I think we have achieved a very important result. In this respect one may call it a political perspective, because it shows a way forward concerning action towards environmental and other global problems.



**LIKE THE BULLET
OF AN IMAGINARY
REVOLVER
THE SPECTER
OF POPULAR CULTURE
IN EUROPE**

BY DIONISIO CAÑAS

Some years ago, Bernard-Henri Lévi, the French thinker, declared that "populism and one of its variants, the cult of youth," constituted one of the most

serious threats to European culture. Recently, Luis Gordillo, the Spanish artist, wrote that "very soon we shall see the debarkation of anti-art, though not by the expected and already proven sectors (appropriation and reductionism) but by a generalized populism." This alarmist attitude towards the invasion of European culture by popular elements is not new.

James Joyce wrote, in the early part of this century, that the most important Irish theater "had strayed from the path that leads to artistic progress, by giving in to the wishes of the masses." In 1922, José Ortega y Gasset published, in the journal *España*, an article with a title that clearly was intended as a manifesto: "The Imperative of Intellectuality." The Spanish writer states that: "The annihilation of European intellectuals goes hand in hand with their mobilization" by political groups. Ortega goes even further; towards the end of the article, he peremptorily asserts: "If the 'people' are spontaneity and abandonment, then aristocracy is discipline and regimentation. So then, a nation is the organization of 'the people' by the aristocracy."

Of course, he refers to an intellectual aristocracy.

Fifty years later, Fidel Castro said that "there has been a certain inhibition in the circles of true intellectuals, who have left cultural problems in the hands of a small group of sorcerers." Then, who are the true intellectuals? The answer is elementary: those who are revolutionaries and populists. However, in 1968, a Cuban writer (Leopoldo Avila), declared that "the enemies of our culture are those who have been concerned, not in doing artistic work for the people, but in establishing international relations, favored by and using the means of the revolution, in order to use these means against it." Furthermore, "those who have not known how to use what they have received [from the people] assume aristocratic and paternalistic roles, thus forgetting the fact that one ascends to the people; that in a revolution the people are the best teachers."

In this fashion, the word "people" is used, like the bullet of an imaginary revolver, by elitists and populists in